

Flora & Son (2023)



Flora & her troubled son
Max live in Dublin. (c)
Apple TV+

Director/writer John Carney has given us a delightful ode to mother-son relationship. Our enjoyment is tremendously enhanced by the sprightly music. The director, who collaborated with musician Gary Clark to create the songs for his 2016 film *Sing Street*, again joins forces with that composer. In both films he celebrates the gift of music, with its ability to bridge differences and to bring us together. Both films take place in Dublin, the earlier one dealing with a teenager and his slightly older brother, and his current film with a teenage son and his mother.

We first see Flora (Eve Hewson) dancing wildly and drinking at a club. We will learn that she had missed out on such revelry due to her pregnancy while still in her mid teens. Now she seems to be trying to catch up. But she is brought back to the reality of the responsibilities of motherhood when the local constable confronts her with her son Max (Orén Kinlan) who has been caught stealing, They have frequently been at odds, and now as she tries to follow the policeman's advice to find something to occupy Max's time, the tension between them is even higher. Flora is divorced from her would-be musician husband Ian (Jack Reynor). He sees the boy occasionally, but she is virtually alone in trying to raise him with values.

As she passes by a dumpster, she spots a castaway guitar, apparently thinks about Max's interest in music, retrieves it, cleans it up, places a bow upon it, and presents it to her son. If she expects his gratitude, she is sorely disappointed. He scorns the gift, declaring he is not at all interested in that kind of music. He has been experimenting with electronic, computer produced music, combined with rap.

The guitar is not neglected for long. She picks it up, tries to produce a few cords, and soon is searching the internet for a guitar teacher. None of them satisfy her until she comes across Jeff (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), a guitar teacher in California who charges \$20 for an hour's lesson. Something about his easy-going personality attracts her, and they enter into a relationship that gradually grows personal as well as professional. Jeff had failed as a professional song writer, so he has resorted to type, described in that old saying, "Those that can't do, teach." But he has not lost his passion for music and its ability to imbue meaning and jot to life.

He eventually shares with Flora the favorite song he has written. Her response is not what he had hoped for. He then sends her a video of Joni Mitchell singing "Both Sides Now" as an example of what he was trying to achieve. The scene of Flora listening to that incredibly beautiful song, her facial expression showing she is completely caught up in it, is my favorite of the film, equally as moving as the much louder climactic scene. Soon, she is back in touch with Jeff, suggesting that the song needs a bridge and chorus, which she has written. They play the revised song together, both enthused by the improved version. By now Jeff is also attracted to Flora, so they talk about meeting in L.A., because Flora has saved up enough money to pay for a flight. However, neither Ian nor her friends are in a position to watch Max for the two week visit.

As Flora develops romantic feelings for Jeff, she also grows closer to her son. She is impressed with a song he has created

on his computer, thus for the first time discovering his love for rock rather than her preference for dance music. When he reveals that he is interested in a girl at school, she suggests that he write a song for her. Needing an additional piece of equipment to produce his song, he resorts to stealing it from the music store. Caught again by the police, he faces time now in juvenile detention. Will this be Flora's opportunity to get away to be with Jeff, or—?

What Flora decides leads to a wonderful musical climax, one that maybe stretches credulity a bit, but is so tunefully pleasurable that this is easily overlooked. It is also a pleasure to see her spiritual journey from self-centeredness to other-concerned sacrifice. Like in the proverb quoted above, Flora rejoices—and so does Max and his father Ian. I have loved the previous two John Carney films I have reviewed – *Once* and [Begin Again](#)—because of his belief that music is such a great gift, able to bring people together and open them up to life's possibilities. Gordon-Levitt and Hewson do their own singing. The songs this time might not be as good as those in Carney's previous film, but they still are inspiring, providing the uplift to both the characters' lives, but our own as well. This is a good film to see whether you're a bit tired or depressed by the news or if you just want to kick off your shoes and express your joy of living.

This review is in the Sept. issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store.